

NATIVE VILLAGE OF POINT HOPE – ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE – CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY – DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE – NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY – NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL – NORTHERN ALASKA ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER – OCEAN CONSERVANCY – OCEANA – PACIFIC ENVIRONMENT – RESISTING ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION ON INDIGENOUS LANDS (REDOIL) – SIERRA CLUB – THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

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Shell Oil Chukchi Sea Drilling Plans Challenged
Analysis of Impacts Sorely Lacking

Anchorage, AK – Conservation and Alaska Native groups called for a timeout on oil drilling in the Arctic Ocean’s Chukchi Sea yesterday, filing a legal challenge against Shell Oil’s permit to drill in the region next summer. The U.S. Department of the Interior’s Minerals Management Service (MMS) approved drilling in the Chukchi Sea after doing only an abbreviated and internal review of its potential harms and despite significant concerns surrounding Shell’s oil leases.

Last spring, a federal appeals court told the Interior Department that it needed to take a more complete look at how oil and gas development would harm the area’s environment – an assignment the Interior Department has not finished despite moving forward with approving Shell’s drilling. Additionally, the lease sale for the leases on which Shell would drill is also the subject of unresolved litigation in the Alaska Federal District Court.

Under Shell’s plan, a huge 514-foot-long drill ship and an armada of support vessels and aircraft would patrol the waters of the icy Arctic Ocean, generating industrial noise in the ocean, emitting tons of air pollutants, including heat-trapping gases, and thousands of barrels of water pollutants. The Chukchi Sea is habitat for endangered bowhead whales, threatened polar bears,

walrus and a host of other wildlife – many of which are vital to sustaining the thousands-year old subsistence way of life of Alaska Native coastal communities.

Shell's plan to drill in the Chukchi Sea is part of a larger Arctic drilling program slated to begin in 2010. Last October, Secretary Salazar also approved Shell's plan to drill up to three wells in the Beaufort Sea in 2010, also after only cursory environmental review. In December, conservation and Alaska Native groups challenged that approval.

In addition to the Interior Department's approval of Shell's drilling, Shell still needs air emissions and ocean discharge permits from the Environmental Protection Agency. It also needs marine mammal harassment permits from the National Marine Fisheries Service. These agencies can take a different path than Interior.

Secretary Salazar's approval of Shell's drilling also runs directly counter to other federal agencies' initiatives to manage the region with a science-based approach, including a protective Arctic Fisheries Management Plan adopted by the Department of Commerce.

The Arctic is a region under great stress from climate change. The Arctic ecosystem depends on sea ice to thrive. As climate change ravages the region – the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world – this sea ice melts at a rapid pace. Scientists now predict that summer sea ice could be gone within a decade, threatening the very existence of species such as polar bears, seals, and walrus, that make the ice their home. Industrial development in these waters will only compound the problems.

Shell's drilling would take place directly in the endangered bowhead whale's migration pathway through the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. It threatens harm to bowheads, including mothers and calves, walrus, and other marine species and to Alaska Native communities that depend on these species for their subsistence way of life.

Shell's drilling brings the threat of oil spills. Nonetheless, MMS downplays the risks and impacts of large oil spills, claiming that large spills simply won't happen during exploration. However, if a large oil spill were to happen, there is no technology and little capacity to adequately clean it up in the Arctic's icy conditions. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen noted in a recent Senate committee field hearing in Alaska that this lack of capacity to clean up a spill in the Arctic could spell disaster for the Arctic's pristine waters.

Yesterday's challenge was filed in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals by the Native Village of Point Hope, Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Ocean Conservancy, Oceana, Pacific Environment, Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL), Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society. The organizations are being represented by Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm.

Statements of Alaska Native and Conservation Group representatives

“The ocean is our garden. We rely on it for subsistence foods that have sustained us and our culture for thousands of years. MMS approved Shell’s drilling in our ocean next summer without even responding to our concerns. Its approval recklessly endangers our way of life,” said **Lily Tuzroyluke, Executive Director of the Native Village of Point Hope**.

“We are deeply concerned about the increasing industrialization of the Arctic Ocean and its effects on indigenous people of the Arctic. Noise from Shell’s drilling can harm whales and other animals we rely on for our subsistence way of life. Air pollution sickens our communities. An oil spill would have devastating consequences for years to come, especially since there is no way to clean up oil in the icy Arctic Ocean. MMS has ignored our voice and approved Shell’s drilling without fully analyzing and disclosing the risks and potential impacts. Our ecosystem and culture should not be put in jeopardy for the profit of the oil industry,” said **Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak, Inupiat resident of Nuiqsut and REDOIL member**.

“We were really hoping for a new, careful approach by the federal government toward America’s Arctic,” said **David Dickson, Western Arctic and Oceans Program Director for Alaska Wilderness League**. “This disappointing shortcut approval for Shell’s drilling program indicates that the old drill now approach, regardless of the risks, is still in place.”

“America’s Arctic is already under great stress from global warming while our understanding of the Arctic Ocean ecosystem is extremely limited and there is no effective means of responding to an oil spill in the bad weather and broken ice conditions common to the area,” said **Eric Myers, Senior Policy Representative of Audubon Alaska**.

“The Arctic is reeling from the impacts of climate change. The sea ice that polar bears and walrus need to survive is melting at an alarming rate. In the face of such rapid change and instability, the Obama administration must proceed with extreme caution in America’s Arctic. If it doesn’t, it risks being remembered as the administration that turned this precious place into a polluted industrial zone,” said **Rebecca Noblin, Alaska Director for Center for Biological Diversity**.

“The risk of a spill in the Arctic is a reality, and if a spill does happen, we’d have no proven technology to clean it up,” said **Karla Dutton, the Alaska program director for Defenders of Wildlife**. “Drilling in the Chukchi Sea may pollute the water and push imperiled animals such as polar bears and walrus, already threatened by global warming, even closer to extinction.”

“The Obama administration has prioritized moving to clean energy and addressing climate change, and protecting the Arctic from drilling should be part of that approach,” said **Chuck Clusen, Alaska Project Director for Natural Resources Defense Council**. “As we move forward with cutting carbon pollution at home and around the world, the Department of Interior should make better choices for the Arctic, and not give in to the unreasonable demands of the oil industry.”

“Shell’s drilling brings with it the risk of large oil spills. Chronic spills are a fact of life from oil and gas operations on Alaska’s North Slope, where over 6,000 spills have occurred since 1996, and more than 400 of these took place at offshore oil fields. In the icy conditions of the Arctic Ocean, there is no way to effectively clean up spilled oil,” said **Pamela A. Miller, Alaska Program Director for Northern Alaska Environmental Center.**

“The Arctic is our planet’s air conditioner, and it plays a key role in regulating our global climate. Expanding industrial uses in a region that is poorly understood and already under enormous stress could have grave consequences, not only for the Arctic, but for the planet as a whole,” said **Andrew Hartsig of Ocean Conservancy.**

“We all deserve clean air and clean water,” said **Michael LeVine, Pacific Senior Counsel for Oceana.** “Shell, like anyone else, must comply with the law, and it is the government’s responsibility to enforce the laws that protect our air, water and ocean resources. Neither Shell nor MMS has lived up to its legal obligations in this case, and it is our responsibility to take action to make sure that our air and water are protected.”

“It is incomprehensible that new drilling in the Chukchi Sea—ground zero for the impacts of climate change—is being given the green-light with only a cursory environmental and sociocultural review,” said **Whit Sheard, Alaska Program Director of Pacific Environment.** “Secretary Salazar needs to pay more respect to the very clear message coming from both traditional indigenous subsistence users and the global scientific community: these Bush-era high-risk plans to industrialize the Arctic Ocean are too much, too soon, too fast.”

“It’s irresponsible for Shell to be pursuing dangerous offshore oil development when they know they can’t clean up oil spills in the Arctic’s broken sea ice. Instead of putting our children’s heritage at risk, we should be investing in the clean energy economy, which will create jobs, fight global warming, and leave our last wild places intact,” said **Dan Ritzman, Sierra Club Alaska Program Director.**

“Oil companies and politicians insist that it is possible to explore and develop for oil in Alaska without harm to wildlife and the environment. But oil development is inherently a dirty business. At every stage from exploration to production to transportation, oil development negatively impacts the environment. Instead of moving forward with piecemeal and poorly analyzed development that puts Arctic wildlife and subsistence cultures at risk, the Obama Administration should take a time-out on all new Arctic oil exploration and development until we have a far better understanding of the science and potential impacts of development, particularly in the face of climate change,” said **Nicole Whittington-Evans, acting regional director of The Wilderness Society Alaska office.**

“Other federal agencies from which Shell must obtain additional permits to drill have choices to make – follow the Interior Department’s rush to develop oil before we know its impacts or follow the growing consensus that we need to proceed with caution in this unspoiled place already under great stress from climate change,” said **Erik Grafe of Earthjustice.**